

[The following is the author's original article, published in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (2017): 109–26.]

## The Nature of the Church in Theological Interpretation: Culture, *Volk*, and Mission

David W. Congdon

IVP Academic

**Abstract:** In a 2012 article on Bultmann and Augustine, R. W. L. Moberly argued that the church should be understood as a “plausibility structure” for faith and thus a presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture. My response to him in 2014 addressed misinterpretations of Bultmann but did not speak to the central issue of the church as a presupposition. The present article rectifies this omission by interrogating the meaning of the church in the present discussion of “theological interpretation of Scripture” (TIS), which largely views the church as a distinct culture. The church-as-culture model bears an important resemblance to the church-as-*Volk* model that was dominant during the period of the church struggle in Germany in the 1930s. Bultmann developed his concept of the church as an eschatological community in direct contrast to the church-as-*Volk* idea. If the church is in some sense a presupposition for theological interpretation, then we first have to ask what we mean by “church,” and some answers to that question may be theologically problematic.

*Key Words* — Bultmann, church, culture, ecclesiology, eschatological community, kerygma, mission, plausibility structure, rule of faith, Volkskirche

### Revisiting Bultmann and Augustine

In a recent exchange, Walter Moberly and I discussed the role of the church in the interpretation of Scripture, with particular attention to the legacy of Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of

---

<sup>1</sup> See R. W. L. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church: Bultmann and Augustine Revisited,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1–22; David W. Congdon, “Kerygma and Community: A Response to R. W. L.

Moberly's original thesis was the claim that the sociological entity of the church is a presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture. He made this argument—with some assistance from Peter Berger and Lesslie Newbigin—in conversation with Augustine's statement that "I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me." He argued that Bultmann "had little to say theologically about the church" and likely "would not . . . have given a positive reading to Augustine's sentence."<sup>2</sup> Moberly attributed this lack of attention to the church to certain cultural and theological factors, some benign<sup>3</sup> and others more problematic.<sup>4</sup> In essence, he argued that Bultmann took the church for granted as part of his German Lutheran (i.e., Christendom) context.

My response to Moberly sought to demonstrate that Bultmann's treatment of the church was not due to some cultural blind spot but was in fact directly connected to his positive conception of the kerygma. As a dialectical theologian in the Lutheran tradition, Bultmann understands revelation as the word that comes *from* God *to* the world. The church comes into existence whenever people receive this word and declare it to others. When this occurs, we can say that church tradition belongs to the event itself. Crucially, though, Bultmann insists that revelation always *remains* a divine event and does not become a piece of the world. Rather than a mark of conformity to his culture, I argued that this very position is what funds Bultmann's *critique* of the German Christian movement, which he understands precisely as a reduction of revelation to the empirical community of Germany ("blood and soil").

---

Moberly's Revisiting of Bultmann," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8, no. 1 (2014): 1–23; R. W. L. Moberly, "Bible and Church, Bultmann and Augustine: A Response to David Congdon," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (2015): 39–48.

<sup>2</sup> Moberly, "Theological Interpretation," 21.

<sup>3</sup> For example, "the fact that it is the Bible, more than any other religious text(s), that is of supreme existential significance is so much part of the air [Bultmann] breathes that in important respects he fails to reflect on it as a presupposition for his biblical exegesis" (ibid., 11).

<sup>4</sup> Two examples will suffice. First, "Bultmann's inability to have anything other than a likely shrug to contribute to discussion of the maturing and deepening of human character and its possible significance for biblical interpretation is surely indicative of a real deficiency within his preferred categories of understanding" (ibid., 10). Second, "Bultmann's membership of the Confessing Church did not apparently give him any appreciation of ecclesiology as potentially generative of a critique of certain common cultural assumptions" (ibid., 21). In my response to Moberly, I disputed the latter statement in particular, since it was based on an interpretive error, namely, that Bultmann's discussion of nation in his lectures on theology indicated his agreement with the wider German, indeed National Socialist, culture of his day, when in fact it was written in 1933 expressly to criticize the German Christians.

In his reply to me, Moberly correctly points out that my response did not address the main thrust of his argument, namely, that the visible, public church is “a plausibility structure for Christian believing.”<sup>5</sup> He asks (and answers in the negative), “Would Bultmann have agreed with Augustine?”<sup>6</sup> I agree with Moberly that, in certain key respects, Bultmann and Augustine would not have agreed, and I readily admit this was not the question I intended to answer. In that sense my response left the second-half of his article largely untouched. My concern was that, in setting up Bultmann as a foil for Augustine, Moberly was misrepresenting Bultmann in a way serious enough to warrant correction. Giving Bultmann a fair hearing was an end in itself. At the same time the missiological and intercultural material toward the end of my response was intended as an indirect comment on Moberly’s proposal.<sup>7</sup>

The task of this article is to make explicit what was merely implicit in my previous article, but to do this requires taking a historical and dogmatic detour through modern ecclesiology. Just as Bultmann wrote about the church within a particular theological and political context, so too the interest in the church within contemporary “theological interpretation of Scripture” has its own context. If we are going to make the church a hermeneutical presupposition, we need to investigate what exactly we mean by “church.” In this article I advance the claim that there is a correspondence between the concept of the church within theological interpretation of Scripture and the concept developed by the German Christians against whom Bultmann was arguing. In both cases there is a resistance to the idea of the church as an inherently missionary community of crosscultural translation. Bultmann’s eschatological understanding of the church holds fast to the New Testament witness to the church’s missionary calling in Christ.

### The Church as Culture

Moberly’s argument that “the life and witness of the Christian churches is in important ways a legitimate presupposition . . . for belief in the biblical content” ought to be uncontroversial.<sup>8</sup> As he explains it, one believes—and one continues to believe—because one has been shaped by a

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, “Bible and Church,” 44.

<sup>7</sup> After summarizing my thoughts on the missiological nature of demythologizing, Moberly simply writes: “These are major issues that indeed merit serious discussion” (ibid., 41). Moberly does not see this material as relevant to the questions he was trying to ask. I hope to demonstrate its relevance in the remainder of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 42.

particular community of faith. The church in this sense is the *context* within which one believes the message of the gospel. We might call this the *principle of contextuality*: all biblical interpretation presupposes a social or ecclesial context in which the text becomes existentially meaningful. At this level there is, in fact, agreement between Augustine and Bultmann, something I tried to indicate in my response when I pointed out that, for Bultmann, exegesis presupposes “the tradition of the church of the word.” Only insofar as the interpreter stands “in the tradition of the word” is she able to interpret the text.<sup>9</sup> But Moberly criticizes Bultmann for not including the social reality of the church “as a theological presupposition of the kind that interpreters . . . bring to bear on their reading of the biblical text.”<sup>10</sup> We might call this the *principle of normativity*. The problem is that the first principle does not entail the second. It is one thing to say our commitment to these texts presupposes the fact of our social context; it is another thing entirely to say this context must play a normative role in the interpretation of these texts. To understand why Moberly understands the church as *both* context and norm, while Bultmann does not, we need to interrogate their respective ecclesiologies.

Moberly’s articles, along with the wider literature on theological interpretation, raise a fundamental theological question: What exactly *is* the church? When we say that the church is a presupposition for biblical interpretation, which church do we have in mind: the local congregation, the group of people who identify as “Christian” in a national census or Pew Research Center survey, a particular confessional community (defined, for example, by the Augsburg Confession or the Westminster Confession of Faith), the so-called “Great Tradition” defined by the first four (or more?) ecumenical councils, or something else entirely? Asking

---

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Das Problem einer theologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments,” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, vol. 2: *Bultmann, Gogarten, Thurneysen* (ed. Jürgen Moltmann; Munich: Kaiser, 1963), 66–67. See Congdon, “Kerygma and Community,” 8. Moberly does not refer to this passage from my article, but it seems to me that Bultmann here grants what Moberly argues for on the basis of Augustine. Moberly claims that “it was Bultmann’s membership of the church (in one of its Lutheran forms) that made him privilege the NT and bring certain fundamental presuppositions about the intrinsic significance of the Bible to his work. The fact that he himself was apparently unable to recognize this or reflect on it is no reason why others should do likewise” (Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 21). But in fact Bultmann did recognize this fact explicitly and highlighted its importance. Whether he should have reflected on it as a normative presupposition for interpretation is another question entirely.

<sup>10</sup> Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 6. Later he says that the church “is indispensable for *giving content to* and making accessible the enduring and universal significance of the biblical witness” (*ibid.*, 20; emphasis added).

about the definition of the church presupposes a still more fundamental question, namely, what constitutes the church's apostolicity? If the church is the community devoted "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship" (Acts 2:42), what establishes a community as being in continuity with the faith of the apostles?<sup>11</sup>

By and large it would seem answers to these questions are largely assumed within the conversation about theological interpretation of Scripture. To take just one example, the inaugural issue of *Journal of Theological Interpretation* included an article by Richard Hays that makes the following claims:

Theological exegesis is *a practice of and for the church*. We lavish our attention on the biblical texts because these texts have been passed on to us by the church's tradition as the distinctive and irreplaceable testimony to events in which God has acted for our salvation. . . . Learning to read the text with eyes of faith is a skill for which we are trained by *the Christian tradition*. Consequently, theological exegesis knows itself to be part of an ancient and lively conversation. We can never approach the Bible as though we are the first ones to read it—or the first to read it appropriately. We know that we have much to learn from the wisdom of the people who have reflected deeply on these texts before us. Consequently, *theological exegesis will find hermeneutical aid, not hindrance, in the church's doctrinal traditions*.<sup>12</sup>

Moberly's original article is effectively an extension of Hays's claim in the above quote that we attend to "the biblical texts because these texts have been passed on to us by the church's tradition." The church is the presupposition for our reading of these texts as the authoritative word of God. From this Hays concludes that "the church's tradition" should serve as a hermeneutical aid. But which church and whose tradition and what kind of aid?

The phrase "trained by the Christian tradition" is significant. R. R. Reno, in his series preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, writes: "Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? . . . Our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need

---

<sup>11</sup> For the best exploration of this question, see John Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 11–12, 14–15.

training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds.”<sup>13</sup> Reno finds the necessary training and instruction in “a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church.”<sup>14</sup> This body of doctrine—the so-called “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*)—provides the “clarifying principles” and the “schematic drawing” to make sense of the Bible. If we ask where we can find this apostolic doctrine, Reno names “the Nicene tradition,” “the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” “ancient baptismal affirmations of faith,” “the Chalcedonian definition,” and “the creeds and canons of other church councils.” As if anticipating the objection that many important aspects of the tradition are not defined in official creedal documents—and those creedal statements are not self-interpreting anyway—Reno goes on to say that the rule of faith is not “limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect.”<sup>15</sup>

*The animating culture of the church*—we come here to the heart of the matter. Theological interpretation of Scripture seems to presuppose not just a generic “church,” but rather a very specific account of the church as a distinct *culture*.<sup>16</sup> To call the church a “plausibility structure,” as Moberly does, is to identify the church as a culture, since Peter Berger uses the term as a synonym for “cultural world.”<sup>17</sup> This understanding of the church as its own

---

<sup>13</sup> R. R. Reno, “Series Preface,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> I would not claim that theological interpretation of Scripture *requires* an account of the church as culture, since Barth and Bultmann engage in such interpretation without this idea. But as theological interpretation is currently practiced within the Anglo-American academy, this appears to be the dominant presupposition. There are historical reasons for this rooted in the fact that theological interpretation of Scripture arose in the United States out of postliberalism, which has as one of its defining characteristics the concept of the church as culture.

<sup>17</sup> Berger writes: “Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality . . . depends upon *specific* social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question. . . . Thus each world requires a social ‘base’ for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This ‘base’ may be called its plausibility structure.” See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 45. And by “world” Berger means a “cultural world” that is “not only collectively produced, but it remains real by virtue of collective recognition” (*ibid.*, 10). Berger and Thomas Luckmann write elsewhere: “The plausibility structure must become the individual’s world, displacing all other worlds, especially the world the individual ‘inhabited’ before his alternation.” See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 158. Defining the church as a plausibility

cultural context is one of the underlying assumptions in much of theological interpretation that has, for the most part, gone unexamined.<sup>18</sup> But this account of the church predetermines the limits of faithful biblical interpretation. If the church is already a culture—particularly a culture invested with apostolic authority—then the *content* of the church’s identity is inextricably bound up with a particular historical *form*, and any attempt to translate the church into a new cultural context would be unfaithful to its apostolicity. Robert Wilken makes this very claim. “Culture lives by language,” he writes, and “if there is a distinctly Christian language, we must be wary of translation.” Translation would only be a departure from the distinctive culture of the church. The task for the church in the West, therefore, is “to tell itself its own story and to nurture its own life, the culture of the city of God, the Christian republic.”<sup>19</sup> The task is not to translate but to assimilate: “There must be translation *into* the Lord’s style of language, bringing alien language into the orbit of Christian belief and practice and giving it a different meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Robert Jenson even goes so far as to say that the church is not only a culture but should ideally develop its own “Christian high culture,” which is simply “that culture intensified.”<sup>21</sup> And since this culture comprises signs “that are not items of a language”—for example, images, processions, ritual practices, architecture, and the like—they are not “disposable by translation.”<sup>22</sup> Interpretation of the biblical text can thus be an assimilation of other cultures into the church’s singular apostolic culture, but it cannot translate the gospel into a plurality of

---

structure thus entails an antagonistic relationship with other cultural contexts, which is precisely the problem with the church-as-culture model.

<sup>18</sup> For a critique of the conception of the church as a culture, see Flett, *Apostolicity*, 103–37.

<sup>19</sup> Robert L. Wilken, “The Church as Culture,” *First Things* 142 (2004): 35–36.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, “The Church’s Way of Speaking,” *First Things* 155 (2005): 30. We can trace this idea back to Lindbeck’s well-known definition of postliberal theology as intratextual theology, which “redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text” (George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [25th Anniversary ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 104).

<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “Christian Civilization,” in *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* (ed. L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 158. Given that Jenson contrasts this “Christian high culture” with Africa and Asia, it is clear that he understands this culture to be the culture of “Christian Europe.”

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60.

diverse cultural forms, since any act of translation would be to deviate from the faith of the apostles. The concrete form of the church-as-culture is therefore both context and norm; the practices and traditions of the church are transcultural, universal, and beyond critique.

This conception of the church-as-culture implicitly underlies Moberly's objection to Bultmann's observation that the NT texts encounter us as strange and alien. While Moberly agrees that the NT originated in an alien culture, he argues that Bultmann's contention is false insofar as one considers the NT documents as coming to us today through a history of some 2,000 years of continuous interpretation and use, in which their language, concepts, and world picture have been continuously appropriated in the life of the church, in liturgy, music, art, architecture, commentary, preaching, and daily living (and have been substantially embodied in Western culture as a whole until recent times).<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the texts are not culturally alien to us *only insofar as the church is our culture*. Such a claim, of course, presupposes that becoming a Christian means becoming enculturated within a particular way of life. The church either displaces or is identical with one's geographical-temporal cultural context. If it displaces that context, then we have a separatist conception of the church (e.g., a monastic order); if it is identical with that context, then we have some version of Christendom, to which Moberly refers when he speaks of the church being "substantially embodied in Western culture." Whether the church keeps its culture distinct from the world or assimilates the world into its culture, either way the relationship between the church and its surroundings is an inherently antagonistic one. Other cultural contexts are enemy territory; the church can either overcome the enemy or remain set apart from it.<sup>24</sup>

There are many reasons to be concerned about this understanding of the church as it relates to biblical interpretation. One question has to do with the NT support for the church-as-culture model.<sup>25</sup> While there is clearly a greater concern for the church in the later writings of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Moberly, "Theological Interpretation," 10.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Pickard warns that "the Church will be sharply distinguished from the world" whenever there is a "sacred inflation" of the church due to a "Docetic ecclesiology." See Stephen K. Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Käsemann, for his part, argues that Paul "is not interested in the church *per se* and as a religious group. He is only interested in it in so far as it is . . . the sphere in which and through which Christ proves himself *Kyrios* on earth after his exaltation." The problem is that "what Paul preached in Christological terms has now been turned into the function of ecclesiology," and we start to see this already in Ephesians, where "the function of Christology . . . consists in caring



NT canon, especially in the pastoral and catholic epistles, is this a normative trajectory that finds fulfillment in modern ecumenical efforts, or is this instead a deviation from the kerygmatic norm that comes from the church growing more concerned with its own preservation and identity than with the coming Lord? Even if one takes the former view, it is not clear that this justifies viewing the church as a particular culture. A more compelling reason to be concerned about the current discussion of the church has to do with its implications for mission, which is what I gestured toward in the conclusion to my response to Moberly.<sup>26</sup> Ernst Käsemann points us in the right direction when he says, regarding Paul's concept of the body of Christ, that "the watchword is solidarity, not uniformity. Paul finds it important for the church to remain polyform. Only in this way can it pervade the world, since the world's everyday reality is not to be conformistic."<sup>27</sup> While Käsemann was thinking primarily in terms of individual gifts and callings, the present reality of world Christianity forces us to grapple with the church not only as polyform but more specifically as *polycultural*. The cultural multivalence of world Christianity involves a diversity of languages, rituals, structures, aesthetic styles, and the like, which are necessarily connected to a diversity of theologies and theological presuppositions. Assuming such diversity is both legitimate and necessary, it follows that it is necessary to distinguish between the defining message of Christianity and the cultural forms in which that message takes contextual shape, and this distinction then makes it possible to engage in translation. Rejecting translation, which the culture model requires, is effectively to deny the diversity-in-solidarity that Käsemann sees as characteristic of the church.<sup>28</sup>

---

for the orderly growth of the church." See Ernst Käsemann, "The Theological Problem Presented by the Motif of the Body of Christ," in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 102–21, at 117 and 121. It is telling when Jenson writes that "the church's cultural identity simply is Israel; to see what is our culture as church, we can only read the Old Testament. . . . Even as the church's reading of the Old Testament is always an interpretation by the crucifixion and resurrection, it remains the case that to know what is appropriate to her culture she has no place else to look." See Robert W. Jenson, "Election and Culture: From Babylon to Jerusalem," in *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement* (ed. Stephen R. Holmes; Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2008), 59. Jenson assumes the church is a culture and thus the OT provides the necessary content. But what if the lack of cultural definition in the NT indicates we ought to think of the church in radically different terms?

<sup>26</sup> Congdon, "Kerygma and Community," 17–23.

<sup>27</sup> Käsemann, "Theological Problem," 118–19.

<sup>28</sup> For a broader critique of the postliberal account of Christianity as a distinct culture, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997),

We are forced, in other words, to make a decision. Either the church is a single uniform apostolic culture—a culture that is itself a contingent product of the church’s history in the European West—which means that all other cultures must conform to the dominant church’s (doctrinal, liturgical, aesthetic) structure, or the church is a multicultural and polyform community whose essence is not defined by a specific doctrinal tradition and structure but by a particular divine reality, the transcendence of which places it beyond every worldly entity, including the church in all its cultural diversity. We cannot have it both ways. We must either recognize that the church-constituting event stands above and beyond all cultural contexts as their ground, limit, and norm, or we must conflate this event with a particular culturally conditioned tradition, thereby making the church’s relation to other contexts combative in principle. If the church’s rule of faith is a culture, then every practice of interpretation and communication—whether it is the act of interpreting Scripture or the act of missionary proclamation—becomes a colonialist act, since the church would be replicating its culture by assimilating a foreign culture into its own.

### The Church as *Volk*

The postliberal account of the church as an apostolic culture arose in part as a response to the Bultmann school. While Bultmann never encountered the postliberal position directly, there are points of continuity between the latter and the position that Bultmann actually opposed during his life, namely, the conception of the church as a *Volk*.

The German word *Volk* has no direct English equivalent but is usually translated as “people” or “nation,” though it carries a specific set of connotations that these other words do not accurately convey.<sup>29</sup> While the word has roots in the Old High German *folc* meaning a mass of people or body of soldiers, the modern German concept of *Volk* owes its origins to eighteenth-century romanticism, especially the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder, where the concept

---

93–119. Tanner advocates for a view of Christian identity as a “hybrid formation” that is “essentially impure and mixed” (ibid., 114).

<sup>29</sup> The word *Volkstum* is equally untranslatable and refers to the character and traditions of the *Volk*. It is sometimes translated as “nationality,” “nationhood,” or “national customs.” For the sake of clarity I have left both *Volk* and *Volkstum* in the German.

of *Volk* developed as a romantic alternative to Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>30</sup> Whereas Enlightenment philosophers conceived of the state as a mechanical political entity “held together by brute force,” Herder conceived of *Volk* and nation as “the natural family, an organism of nature.”<sup>31</sup> Herder analyzed the natural family in terms of “communities or *Völker* that preserve separate and unique identities. For Herder, the *Volk* is the most important collectivity, determined by climate, education, and relations with neighbors. Each *Volk* maintains its own identity through language, character, and environment.”<sup>32</sup> According to Wulf Koepke, “Herder sees something like *Volk* as determined by a common way of thinking, thus by tradition and culture, and above all, by language.”<sup>33</sup> *Volk* thus names a specific form of what we might call “culture.”

What makes *Volk* distinctive in relation to “culture” is that Herder connects this concept to a sentimental primitivism: *Volk* does not refer to just any culture but to a culture untainted by civilization. The *Volk* is “a class apart from philosophers, poets, and orators,” namely, those who have been affected by “artificial methods of training and culture.” *Volk* refers instead to “primitive peoples” who are “more nearly the natural man.”<sup>34</sup> Like many of the romantics of his day, in contrast to the Anglo-American idea of nature as intrinsically violent and savage (e.g., Hobbes, Locke, Tennyson), Herder was captivated by the idea of the “noble savage.” For him the state of nature was a nearly mystical ideal and norm for human life. Consequently, “the moral standards and intellectual equipment found among [primitive peoples] are eulogized and idealized whenever these peoples as groups are compared with civilized communities.”<sup>35</sup> In sum,

---

<sup>30</sup> See Georgiana R. Simpson, “Herder’s Conception of ‘Das Volk’” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1921), 1; Alexander von Bormann, “Volk als Idee: Zur Semiotisierung des Volksbegriffs,” in *Volk, Nation, Europa: Zur Romantisierung und Entromantisierung politischer Begriffe* (ed. Alexander von Bormann; Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998), 35–41.

<sup>31</sup> H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development, 1922–1945* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Moses Hess and Modern Jewish Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>33</sup> Wulf Koepke, as quoted in Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 127. Note the similarity between this and Reno’s definition of the church’s culture as a “pervasive habit of thought.”

<sup>34</sup> Simpson, “Herder’s Conception of ‘Das Volk,’” 9–10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

the German concept of *Volk* “is specifically romantic, conservative (‘Blut und Boden’) and anthropological.”<sup>36</sup>

With this constellation of associations in mind, we can see why Friedrich Schleiermacher adopted the term *Volk* into theology to form *Volkskirche*.<sup>37</sup> He introduced the concept of *Volkskirche* (perhaps best conveyed as the “church-of-the-people”) in his 1822–23 lectures on *Christian Ethics* and used it again in his 1830 second edition of *The Christian Faith* as a contrast to the idea of a “national” or “state” church.<sup>38</sup> Since the word *Volk* referred to the common masses in distinction from the civilized, ruling elite, the point of using *Volkskirche* was to emphasize that the church concerns the entire people; it is an Enlightenment-romantic version of the priesthood of all believers. According to Andreas Leipold, Schleiermacher “employed the concept of ‘*Volkskirche*’ above all as a polemical combat term against an official-consistorial church as well as against a royally imposed Union agenda in Prussia.”<sup>39</sup> The emphasis on *Volkskirche* was thus initially a way of freeing the church from subordination under the authority of the state. Because membership within the *Volkskirche* is automatic upon birth, everyone is included regardless of class or position. The *Volkskirche* thus differentiates itself from both state churches (like the Church of England) and free churches (like the Baptists). One belongs to the *Volkskirche* not because one is a citizen of a modern nation-state or because one has made a personal decision, but because one belongs to the “people,” that is, to a particular community of nature (“blood and soil”).

---

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Mitzman, “Left Populism and Social Romanticism in 19th Century France: The Case of Michelet,” in *Volk, Nation, Europa: Zur Romantisierung und Entromantisierung politischer Begriffe* (ed. Alexander von Bormann; Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998), 160.

<sup>37</sup> For a history of the concept of *Volkskirche* from 1822 to 1945, see Andreas Leipold, *Volkskirche: Die Funktionalität einer spezifischen Ekklesiologie in Deutschland nach 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 11–51. The rest of his study explores how *Volkskirche* was understood in the years following the war, from Edmund Schlink to Herbert Lindner. A major oversight of Leipold’s work is the Aryan paragraph debate of 1933–34, and Bultmann does not appear once in the entire work, despite a section devoted to dialectical theology and another on the German Christians.

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube: Nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt (1830/31)*, ed. Rolf Schäfer, 2 vols., Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 2:438 (§151.1).

<sup>39</sup> Leipold, *Volkskirche*, 13.

While it was not a necessary development, one can see how the *völkisch* movement of the German Christians arose: once the local German *Volk* was defined in racial terms, a correspondingly racialized *Volkskirche* was inevitable. The result can be seen plainly in the debate over the so-called “Aryan paragraph” in 1933. On September 25 Paul Althaus and Werner Elert wrote their “Theological Report” on behalf of the theological faculty at the University of Erlangen, in which they separated “Germanness” (*Deutschtum*) from “Jewishness” (*Judentum*) as representing two different *Völker*. Consequently, “the *German Volk* today perceives the Jews in its midst increasingly as an *alien Volkstum*. . . . [The church] knows itself to be called in the present situation to a new awareness of its *task to be the Volkskirche of the German people*.”<sup>40</sup> It is important to see that Althaus and Elert came to the position they did because of an assumption about *what* the church is. They took it for granted that the church ought to reflect the will of the *Volk*. If the *Volk* understands itself in racist terms, then the church as *Volkskirche* should represent this racism. The German Christians were well aware that they were not in continuity with the apostolic church on this point, which is why they made a distinction between the *Missionskirche*, the missionary church of the NT, and the *Volkskirche*. And as I pointed out in my previous response to Moberly, this is where Bultmann focused his response: unless the church remains a missionary church, it is no longer the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> And to be a missionary church entails being an eschatological community whose identity is never directly identical with the context or *Volk* within which it exists at any given time.

We are now in a position to compare the two previous accounts of the church: the church-as-culture and the church-as-*Volk*. These ecclesiologies represent two modern ways of negotiating the relationship between normativity (the criterion of what the church ought to be) and contextuality (the form given by the church’s location in history). The two models are mirror images of each other. The culture approach *assimilates the context into the norm*, while the *Volk* approach *assimilates the norm into the context*. The former is constantly trying to make the surrounding culture conform to its particular normative ideal. The latter is constantly adapting its

---

<sup>40</sup> Paul Althaus and Werner Elert, “Theologisches Gutachten über die Zulassung von Christen jüdischer Herkunft zu den Aemtern der deutschen evangelischen Kirche,” *TBl* 12 (1933): 321–24, here, p. 323. Emphasis in original. See Heinz Liebing, ed., *Die Marburger Theologen und der Arierparagraph in der Kirche: Eine Sammlung von Texten aus den Jahren 1933 und 1934* (Marburg: Elwert, 1977), 22.

<sup>41</sup> See Congdon, “Kerygma and Community,” 15–17.

norm to fit the surrounding culture. If the culture approach corresponds to traditional orthodoxy, then the *Volk* approach corresponds to modern liberalism, but both represent forms of western Christendom inasmuch as they assume the church is a culture. They share a common DNA even though they move in opposite directions. We can further subdivide the culture model into two versions: the *imperialist* version makes the surrounding context conform to its own cultural norm, while the *separatist* version maintains an antithetical and exilic posture with respect to its surrounding context. Postliberal theologians generally map on to either the imperialist or separatist versions of the culture model, with a strong leaning toward separatism.<sup>42</sup>

The point I want to make here is that both the culture and *Volk* approaches preclude a mission method that allows for crosscultural translation. The culture model views translation as departing from the sacred norm, while the *Volk* model views translation as departing from the local culture (“blood and soil”). Either way norm and culture have been so closely joined in both approaches that the church becomes effectively (or at least ideally) monocultural. Cultural diversity is a threat to, rather than a consequence of, the norm of the gospel, precisely because the gospel *is* a culture and thus multiple cultures would mean multiple gospels.

### The Church as Eschatological Community

While the church struggle was a catalyst for his reflections on the topic, Bultmann rejects the conflation of gospel and culture on biblical and theological grounds. Eschatology is the key to his alternative position: Jesus Christ is the eschatological event, the Christ-kerygma is the eschatological word of God, and faith is eschatological existence.<sup>43</sup> This leads to a corresponding concept of the *church as eschatological community*. The point of his misunderstood notion of “deworldlizing” (*Entweltlichung*) is not to deny that the church takes form within the world as a historical entity with doctrines and practices; it is rather to deny that the *norm* of the church’s existence is to be found in these doctrines and practices. Bultmann’s position is that the

---

<sup>42</sup> If Stanley Hauerwas epitomizes the separatist model, then John Milbank epitomizes the imperialist. Within contemporary American evangelicalism, Russell Moore represents separatism while Jerry Falwell represents imperialism. Lindbeck and Jenson are more ambiguous; they have moments where they sound like one or the other. But the church-as-culture approach unites all of these approaches. None of them makes missionary translation central to the identity of the church. In fact, most of them are strongly opposed to the idea.

<sup>43</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), §§29, 34, 50, respectively.

“proclamation of the word” is what “constitutes the church.”<sup>44</sup> The church is a *creatura verbi*, a creature of the word, and this word is God’s eschatological address in the kerygma. The kerygma proclaims Christ crucified and our crucifixion with Christ through faith (1 Cor 1:23; Gal 2:19); it signals God’s judgment and justification of all human cultures and institutions. God is an eschatological God who transcends every culture, and God calls into existence a community that likewise transcends every culture—and is thereby free for every culture. The church thus understands itself “as the eschatological people of God, as the community of saints who are called out of the world, who are deworldlized.”<sup>45</sup> But this deworldlizing only places the community more fully *in* the world:

God is deworldlized in that God’s action is understood as eschatological action: God withdraws the person from worldly attachments and places him or her directly before God’s eyes. The dehistoricizing or deworldlizing of God and human persons alike is therefore to be understood dialectically: the God who stands beyond world history encounters human persons precisely in their own history, in the everyday, in its gift and demand; the dehistoricized . . . person is directed to the concrete encounter with the neighbor, in which a person is genuinely historical.<sup>46</sup>

Or as Bultmann says in his commentary on the Fourth Gospel, “the community is eschatological and deworldlized *within* the world.”<sup>47</sup> Bultmann’s eschatological model of the Christian community therefore makes the possibility of crosscultural translation integral to its understanding of the church. The eschatological community is permanently open to new cultural forms.

Understanding Bultmann’s eschatological approach to the church should help explain why he cannot place the church alongside “family and national community” (*Familie und Volksgemeinschaft*) as part of what Moberly calls “the social nature of knowledge.”<sup>48</sup> To do so

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>47</sup> Idem, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941), 389.

<sup>48</sup> Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 21: “When [Bultmann] touches on the social nature of knowledge, it is only family and nation, not church, that are mentioned as formative factors.” Moberly cites Rudolf Bultmann, *What Is Theology?* (trans. Roy A. Harrisville; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 53–54. See the original in idem, *Theologische Enzyklopädie* (ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 40.

would be the ecclesiological equivalent of placing divine action alongside natural forces like gravity, reducing Christ to whatever can be historically reconstructed about him, and interpreting faith as a merely neuropsychological phenomenon. In each case it would be tantamount to denying the thing itself. With respect to the church there is the additional factor of National Socialism. Ranging the church alongside family and national community is precisely what the German Christians were doing in 1933 when they defined the church as a *Volkskirche* reflecting the *Volk* (i.e., national community). In the relevant section from *Theologische Enzyklopädie* (*What Is Theology?*) Bultmann goes on to speak about *Volkstum*. He has a footnote in which he says “*Volkstum* is a historical entity [*geschichtliche Größe*].”<sup>49</sup> By contrast he elsewhere writes that the church is “not a world-historical [*weltgeschichtliche*] but rather an eschatological entity [*eschatologische Größe*].”<sup>50</sup> He is not here denying that the church has a worldly-historical form, as if the church only exists invisibly. He is speaking normatively in this passage about what the church truly is according to faith. Bultmann separates the church from sociohistorical factors like *Volkstum* not only because Scripture compels him to do so but because this is at the heart of the Confessing Church’s struggle against the German Christians.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, 40n24.

<sup>50</sup> Idem, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 467.

<sup>51</sup> In my response to Moberly I pointed out that the passage he refers to in *What Is Theology?* was written in 1933 in reaction to the German Christian movement—and thus not in 1926 as Moberly implies, which if true would mean Bultmann refers to *Volk* and *Volkstum* as part of his own project rather than as a response to others. The German publication makes this much clearer by putting line breaks between passages written in different years. Moberly does not mention this point in his reply to me but simply says that he does not “find this account of [Bultmann’s] silence [about the church in this passage of *What Is Theology?*] to be entirely persuasive” (Moberly, “Bible and Church,” 44n11). But this passage must be understood in its historical context. I would argue, in fact, that one needs to isolate all the 1933 passages when reading *What Is Theology?* These have to be read as contextual additions to his lectures designed to address matters of controversy during the church struggle. Bultmann refers to family and *Volk*-community *because these are the aspects of culture being promoted by the German Christians*. The phrase *Familie und Volksgemeinschaft* was part of the German educational policy in the Weimar era. In 1929 the magazine *Kindergärten* began to call itself the “Journal of Socioeducational Tasks in Family and National Community [*Familie und Volksgemeinschaft*].” In 1933, with Hitler’s rise to power, the magazine became the mouthpiece for Nazi propaganda about youth education, now calling itself the “Journal for Political-Educational Tasks in Family and National Community.” The point is that those hearing Bultmann give this lecture would have known he was referring to ideas being promoted by the government at the time.” When reading this one therefore has to pay attention to see where he criticizes Nazi ideology. For instance Bultmann has a footnote in which he says that “German” can at best be an “index” of what is



In response to those who want the church to be a cultural factor in the “social nature of knowledge,” Bultmann provides a warning: be careful what you wish for. One may not be at risk of the nationalism associated with the *Volk* model, but one could very well open the door to the colonialism made possible by the culture model.<sup>52</sup> The eschatological model, by contrast, makes missionary translation basic to the church by preventing the church from either imposing its culture upon others or collapsing its identity into the culture around it.

### The Church and Theological Interpretation

What does this have to do with theological interpretation of Scripture? Simply this: to the extent that theological interpretation makes the church a norm of biblical exegesis, it behooves us to ask just which church it has in mind. We cannot appeal to “the church’s doctrinal tradition” or the “church’s rule of faith” without asking which approach to the church such an appeal presupposes and what implications this has for the life and mission of the Christian community. Identifying the church as a “plausibility structure,” and thus as a culture, has ethical, political, and missiological ramifications that are not necessarily positive or even consistent with the biblical witness. Such a notion might address ecumenical aims and the perceived loss of Christian influence in the West, but at what cost?

Bultmann, for his part, affirms the rule of faith insofar as this *regula* is the kerygma, the message handed on by the church that proclaims the proclaimer, Jesus of Nazareth, to be the eschatological event. In this limited sense the church is indeed for Bultmann a presupposition for faith’s knowledge of God, the world, and oneself. But the church in Bultmann’s eschatological approach is not *itself* the norm; it hands on (i.e., traditions) the norm that is the kerygma alone. The kerygma as the word of God *remains* the word of God and does not become the word of the church. The historical form of the church thus participates in the eschatological reality of Christ, but Christ does not become historicized as a piece of the world. For this reason, the church in its essence is always an eschatological community and is not properly viewed as a sociological entity in the world alongside other entities, such as the nation or the family. In the same way that

---

right but not a “criterion.” There are also, he adds, “deplorable German practices” (Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, 41n26).

<sup>52</sup> My claim is not that those who hold these models are themselves endorsing nationalism or colonialism, only that their ecclesiologies offer no protection against these extremes, and in some cases they might be advocating for a kind of nationalism or colonialism unwittingly.

the Christ whom we worship cannot be directly identified with the Jesus accessible to historical research, so too the church as the eschatological community of Christ cannot be directly identified with the visible, empirical community. Of course, we always encounter the church as an empirical, social body, and in this sense the church is indeed a *context* for theological interpretation. But the church, including its doctrines and practices, cannot serve as a *norm* for interpretation in this capacity. The church is only normative in its eschatological identity, as the people addressed and called by God in the kerygma that proclaims and enacts God's saving action in Christ. Once we understand this we can see that Bultmann *does* make the church a preunderstanding for interpretation, but he does so precisely by making the kerygma his critical norm for understanding the biblical message.

Theological interpretation that makes the church normative for exegesis ultimately runs the risk of presupposing the results of exegesis. This brings us full circle to where Moberly began, namely, with Bultmann's 1957 essay, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" Bultmann here argues that exegesis necessarily has presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) but should be without prejudices (*Vorurteile*). According to Moberly's summary of the first part of the essay, "one must not approach a text in such a way that one only hears what one wants to hear, and not what the text really says."<sup>53</sup> Bultmann specifically rejects two forms of prejudicial exegesis: allegorical interpretation and exegesis "guided by dogmatic prejudices."<sup>54</sup> Moberly criticizes Bultmann regarding the opposition to dogma, arguing that Bultmann assumes his own dogmatic prejudices in the demythologizing program. In my previous response I explained that Bultmann is not opposed to all theological presuppositions but only to those that compete with and are allowed to overrule historical research.<sup>55</sup> While that remains true this does not explain why critical historical inquiry is important. Exegesis for Bultmann is an exercise in the interpretation of history, and given that history continually unfolds in new ways it follows that "all historical knowledge stands open for discussion."<sup>56</sup> The results of exegesis are always open for each person in every generation. The problem with interpretation guided by dogma is that it only confirms what the church already teaches. Such exegesis is not genuinely open to a fresh

---

<sup>53</sup> Moberly, "Theological Interpretation," 2.

<sup>54</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933–1965), 3:143.

<sup>55</sup> Congdon, "Kerygma and Community," 8.

<sup>56</sup> Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?," 3:143.

hearing of the gospel; it has foreclosed on the possibility of the text bearing witness to God's word anew. Moreover, when such dogma is defined in *cultural* terms, interpretation ends up replicating cultural norms. The result, in missiological terms, is formally identical to a colonial mission method in which the spread of Christianity is coterminous with the spread of a specific "Christian culture."<sup>57</sup>

The question for theological interpretation of Scripture is whether, in making the church a presupposition for exegesis, it allows for free and open interpretive inquiry. If the church simply names the *context* within which one encounters the kerygma, then theological interpretation would be materially identical with Bultmann's program. But if the church instead names the cultural *norm* that determines in advance what counts as a faithful reading of Scripture, then those engaged in theological interpretation must ask whether, in seeking to honor the community of faith, they have not collapsed revelation into history and thereby unwittingly opened the door to ideological distortion. The challenge ahead is to affirm the significance of the church within theological interpretation in a way that remains open to the future—and thus open to cultural differences and the necessity of crosscultural translation.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> For a related critique of "ecclesiocentric" versions of theological interpretation of Scripture, see Angus Paddison, "Who and What is Theological Interpretation For?" in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln* (ed. J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 210–23. As Paddison correctly points out, "notions of the text absorbing the world are bound together with robust notions of the church as culture" (ibid., 216). Paddison helpfully differentiates between the *agenda* of theological interpretation of Scripture and the *arguments* used to advance that agenda. Paddison and I are both in agreement with the overall agenda, but we share a concern about the ecclesiocentric and theocentric arguments used to support it.

<sup>58</sup> My deep appreciation to Collin Cornell for his comments on an earlier draft of this article. Any errors are my own.